

Business Partnerships in Education

A Position Paper for Serve Rhode Island's Strategic Planning



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“We want every taxpayer to understand that education is the ticket to economic development.”

-Neil Steinberg, Providence Journal “Looking to build on success of Race to the Top” 8.21.2012

Introduction

Although Rhode Island may be the smallest state, it's economic problems rank among the highest in the nation. From unemployment to the skills gap, Rhode Island has many social issues that need attention. Most never consider the intimate connection between education and the economy, but the two are undeniably tied together. Unfortunately, the Rhode Island high school graduation rate in 2011 was only 77%. This was down from 80% in 2006.¹ In the city of Providence, the graduation rate is even more dismal at 66% and is also down 6% since 2006.² Furthermore, studies have shown that a skill gap contributes to a higher unemployment rate and lower earned wages. If people do not complete enough schooling, they lack certain skills that employers require. 48% of jobs in Rhode Island are for “middle skilled occupations” yet only 37% of the workforce has those necessary skills. The Huffington Post describes these types of jobs as those with “workers with moderate education...a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree”.³ There are 86,000 Rhode Islanders who lack a high school diploma. Adults who earned a high school diploma earn 44% more money than those who don't, and they earn 70% more if they have an associate's degree.⁴ Our education system is clearly failing our students, which in turn is devastating our economy. If students do not graduate high school and learn the skills employers need, they will continue to be unemployed and not contribute to the economy or society as a whole.

What exactly does this mean? If adults don't have the necessary skills for employment, they will exhaust their unemployment benefits, further straining government (both federal and state) resources. In Rhode Island, 128,260 people live in poverty; that's 12.2% of the entire population⁵. In addition, roughly 50% of the population does not make enough money to pay income tax⁶. As for students in Rhode Island, 60% of them qualify for free or reduced lunch⁷, which is the highest percentage per capita of all New England

¹Cohort Graduation Rates - 4-year cohort for 2011, Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012

² *ibid.*

³ “‘Middle-Skill’ Jobs Are Disappearing From The American Economy, A New Study Finds” *Huffington Post*, 6/14/10

⁴ Economic Progress Institute RI-Education and Employer's Task Force Report October 2009

⁵ US Census Bureau -<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/44000.html>

⁶ “Half of Rhode Islanders Don't Owe Income Taxes” Beale, Stephen *GoLocalProv*

⁷ Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://www.ride.ri.gov/finance/nutrition/national.aspx>

states⁸. If residents are not making any money, they cannot spend any money. If they cannot spend any money, no new money is entering the economic system, and growth cannot occur.

What do these all these economic statistics have to do with education? Unfortunately, since our students are not learning the skills they need to succeed, they are negatively affecting the success of our local economy. Students comprise the future workforce, and if they cannot work—and circulate money through the wages they earn—the economy will remain stagnant. If our schools continue to underperform and our students continue to drop out, how will we ever improve our economy? Despite all of these bleak statistics, there is hope to improve Rhode Island's economy for the future. No single aspect of our local community can provide a solution. Partnerships are the key to improving the current state.

Business Partnerships: what are they?

Business partnerships are being used nationally and internationally as a way to provide schools, principals, and teachers with more resources than are readily provided by the school department or state. These partnerships range anywhere from strictly monetary funds to professional development of administration to engaging service learning for students or job shadowing opportunities.

So where exactly is this being done? In Exton, PA the Chamber of Commerce has a Business Education Partnership that provides students with business internships, gives teachers opportunities to visit businesses, and better connect their classroom to the working world. Not only that, but they also create a business environment for students where they create a real business and run it in the classroom. They have to create business plans, organize a board of directors, as well as develop and sell a product⁹.

Long Beach, CA also has a program called the Seamless Education Partnership. The business community, that originally formed this partnership, published a report entitled *A Call to Action* that stressed the importance of education in economic growth. Because of this report, the Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach City College and California State University at Long Beach developed the Seamless Education Partnership in order to make sure their students were prepared for the future. Businesses would sponsor individual high schools, donate to scholarship funds, and provide campaign support to school board members. The other schools, however, help each other by providing professional development for other faculty and by developing different types of academic support, curriculum, and content standards.¹⁰

⁸ Statemaster.com *Education Statistics-Free Lunch Eligible by State*

http://www.statemaster.com/graph/edu_ele_sec_fre_lun_eli-elementary-secondary-free-lunch-eligible

⁹ Exton Region Chamber of Commerce

<http://www.ercc.net/about-us/committees/business-and-education-partnership/>

¹⁰ *Improving Education through Collaboration: A Case Study of the Long Beach Seamless Education Partnership* (2009)Nielsen, Natalie; McCarthy, Kirstin

In Baltimore, MD, volunteers from Price Waterhouse Cooper helped Benjamin Franklin High School through its transformation from a middle to high school. Some members have also worked with the school's science team to develop an environmentally focused club. Also in Baltimore, Laureate Education business leaders help out the Friendship Academy of Science and Technology in many ways. Different teams of employees have taken on different projects including leading students through college tours and workshops, helping parents with financial literacy in the college application process, connecting teachers to other Laureate faculty for professional development, and by providing support to the administration in planning and executing the graduation ceremony¹¹.

Principal Weiner at Cleveland High School in Reseda, California has made a big effort to get Boeing involved in his school. The school successfully developed partnerships that would interest their students in these types of jobs, and in return, Boeing works to increase working relationships because they acknowledge the potential future workforce. Together they've created a strong partnership through which students participate in job shadowing and learn the value of education through mentorships with Boeing staff.

Not all partnerships have to be on such a large scale either. Several smaller partnerships around the country have been successful. These partnerships can include a school or even a class that partners with either smaller businesses or have a more low-key relationship, with improving education still being the focus. A prime example is New Hope, Minnesota. For teachers, local businesses recognize and award coupons when teachers go above and beyond. The school also created "E-mail tutors" where students send their essays and papers to local business volunteers who edit the essay and provide feedback. This type of involvement doesn't even involve face-to-face contact, but provides a necessary help to students as well as freeing up some of the teachers time.¹²

In East Hartford, Connecticut the school district created an Academy of Finance where juniors and seniors in high school complete a two-year program to help prepare students who are interested in working in financial services. They learn the basics of finance, public speaking skills, and even how to effectively use Microsoft office. Through this academy, students get paid internships at businesses, such as Travelers Insurance, and get the benefit of guest speakers and lecturers from these same organizations. Furthermore, many businesses in the community donate money to scholarships for students to go to college, improve their skills even more, and eventually be ready to work in one of the businesses that helped them get their start¹³.

Stakeholder Benefits

These are only a handful of the many partnerships found in the research. They are complex relationships that vary in scope, intensity, and scale. Despite their differences, all

¹¹ PENCIL Partnership Spotlights 2011

<http://www.pencil.org/category/partnership-spotlights/>

¹² Education World, "School-Business Partnerships That Work: Success Stories from Schools of All Sizes"

(http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin323.shtml)

¹³ Brice, P. (2012, 29 August). Phone Interview.

of them have shown that the students and schools are the focus of the partnership, but there are other players that benefit from these connections. Man and Glover pointed out that “governments and educationalists have identified employer engagement as a primary means of securing a more efficient flow of young people into the labor market, while offering a richer, more relevant learning experience to students”¹⁴. In 2010, an entire task force surveyed and analyzed international research and found benefits to all major stakeholders: students, schools, employers.

Some of the results of a 2008 Institute for Education Business Excellence survey found that out of the 15,025 young people surveyed, 90% understood the importance of doing well in school, 89% felt more prepared to work hard in their lessons, and 79% indicated their experience working with a business partnership was enjoyable¹⁵.

A survey by DeHavilland Associates on Business Coalition leaders measured the priorities of the different business coalitions on what they wanted to achieve in schools. When asked to rank priorities on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being “no activity” and 5 being “a major level of activity”, the top three priorities were career awareness (3.67), college preparedness/entry (3.37), and essential skills (reading, math) (3.22), respectively¹⁶. The same survey also explored the overall satisfaction of business leaders in the process of partnering with a school and in attaining their desired outcomes with their partners. The survey found that 40.4% of business coalition leaders were extremely satisfied with the partnership process, while 40.2% were extremely satisfied with the partnership outcomes¹⁷. Businesses leaders focus on the skills that they value in their own employees, and aim to give such skills to students, who make up the future workforce. And, because they were so satisfied with their partnership processes and outcomes, their goals were clearly accomplished. By improving the quality of education in any way, business leaders then positively contribute to the overall future workforce, thus benefiting not only themselves, but the entire economy as well.

Business Partnerships in Rhode Island

Having business partnerships in schools in Rhode Island is completely aligned with Commissioner Gist’s *Transforming RI Education, 2010-2015 Strategic Plan: Our 5 Priorities*. Within “Strategic Priority 2: Accelerate All Schools Towards Greatness”, the plan states that schools should “engage critical stakeholders, related state agencies, education service organizations, the business community, and national and regional experts in development for a full range of viable career pathways”¹⁸. Engaging the business community would allow schools to support the development of leaders who are attempting to transform underperforming schools as well as help to create multiple pathways to colleges and

¹⁴ Man, Glover “Employer Engagement in Schools: The Business Case” *Local Economy*, May 2011

¹⁵ Institute for Education Business Excellence, Taskforce for Education and Employers (2008)

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ DeHavilland Associates, *Business Coalition Leaders Speak Out on Education*, June 2007

¹⁸ Gist, *Transforming RI Education, 2010-2015 Strategic Plan* p. 15-16

careers. These are two of the objectives within Strategic Priority 2 that the business community could enhance greatly.

Serve Rhode Island (SRI) also fits perfectly into the bigger picture of developing these partnerships. Because these partnerships can vary in size and intensity, connector organizations such as Serve Rhode Island become valuable facilitators and third parties. PENCIL Partnerships is a similar organization, based out of New York City, whose sole focus was to foster these relationships. They've been so successful that they've taken on affiliates in other cities such as Baltimore, Rochester, Philadelphia, and even Chicago. This organization started with a "Principal for a Day" event where senior business leaders would spend the majority of the day in the school seeing what a principal does. Eventually, that one event transformed into a bustling agency that oversees 400 partnerships (a quarter of NYC public schools). PENCIL's main roles involve recruiting for schools that are interested, trying to find a match for that school, working with both parties in order to map out a strategic work plan for the year and broker the relationship and manage the project as the year progresses¹⁹. By using a separate organization to mediate these relationships, the third party, such as PENCIL or potentially SRI, both parties can better stay on their work plan track and reach desired goals. A third party such as SRI also facilitates the introduction of innovative business community ideas within the academic structures of the school curriculum/learning requirements and programming.

Another thriving connector organization is Bright Futures, based out of Joplin, Missouri. In 2009, the Superintendent of Joplin Public Schools was determined to solve the high drop-out and truancy rates and formed a Braintrust Committee comprised of leaders from the business community, faith-based organizations, and human service organizations with the sole focus of "helping our kids". Each of these groups was already attempting to help children and local schools individually, but they never combined resources. These community leaders developed a plan where each organization adopts a school, and a member of the advisory board meets with the school principal to identify needs and develop strategies to accomplish their goals. Then, the business leader, advisory board member and principal meet weekly or bi-monthly to assess their progress. The advisory board member also takes these reports back to the rest of the board to get input and reflect. SRI has suggested a version of this concept to several Providence middle and elementary school principals and the idea is well received.

Within the first year, Joplin's drop out rates decreased by 52% and graduation rates increased by 7% in one year²⁰. After other communities saw the success of this one connector organization, these school districts attempted to replicate the model, and Bright Futures USA was formed with 5 affiliate communities in Missouri doing the same thing and seeing similar results.

The Joplin model is worthy of further investigation for adoption in Rhode Island. It is in line with the educational goals put forth by Commissioner Gist, we have seen other connector organizations do it successfully, and Serve Rhode Island already has the foundation of connection resources with people. Some partnerships do exist in Rhode Island through both Serve Rhode Island as well as Rhode Island Mentoring Partnerships (RIMP). Serve Rhode Island has worked with Fidelity Investments, Washington Trust, and

¹⁹ Langsam, R (2012, July 17). Phone Interview

²⁰ BrightFutures Pamphlet 2011 www.brightfuturesusa.org

Hasbro in transforming the physical appearance of schools. RIMP has established partnerships with CVS, Textron, Citizens Bank, Navigant Credit Union, and Koch Eye Associates in developing a partnership for school based mentoring. Although both of these types of partnerships have merit, there is so much more the business community can offer to schools to cater to their needs. Schools and businesses want to make these partnerships happen. Serve Rhode Island could focus more of its resources to forge connections and maintain relationships so that all parties involved can work towards improving both our educational system and our economy.

Conclusion

Because business partnerships are relatively new and have not been rigorously analyzed for impact on academic outcomes, concrete results of how students are directly affected are not widely available. Despite the lack of conclusive research, there is an overwhelming amount of positive indicators showing the benefits of public schools partnering with community members, specifically businesses.

Rhode Island's economy is in need of serious help. There are many approaches to helping it grow, but one that can be relatively easily implemented is tapping into our community's business resources to help our students learn better and obtain the skills they need to be successful. There are too few resources especially for some of our most disadvantaged urban core students, but businesses can help bridge that gap. Serve Rhode Island could use its existing connections in the community to help bring these two worlds together in order to start the process of improving our education system as well as growing our economy.

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